# FAMILY PLANNING AND EUGENIC MOVEMENTS in the Mid-twentieth Century*

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THIS paper reviews and relates to each other the histories of the birth control and eugenics movements; and it attempts to assess their respective positions to-day, in the middle of the twentieth century.

These two movements, which have developed somewhat independently of one another, have now come more closely together than before. The paper concludes with a tentative consideration of some of the problems of the future.

The retrospect will, perforce, be mainly concerned with my own country, Britain, though I will mention other countries such as the U.S.A., France and Germany. My standpoint will be mainly European. I have but small knowledge of Japan, this being my first visit to your country.

My paper is divided into four parts. In the first I will briefly outline the independent developments of the birth control and eugenic movements between the years 1830 and 1930. In the second part, I will describe the changes in standpoint, which occurred in both these movements during the twenty-five years between 1930 and 1955. In the third part I will say something about the position of both these movements to-day. And lastly I will discuss some of the problems which may present themselves in the years ahead.

## 1. Developments from 1830 to 1930

### (a) *Birth control movement*

Round no figure in the domain of population study have more violent controversies raged than that of the Rev. T. R. Malthus (1766–1834). The controversies continue unabated to-day. Francis Place (1771–1854) has been described as the founder of the British birth control movement. Last year was the centenary of his death. But his activities had no discernible effect on Britain's birth-rate which remained consistently high for the first three-quarters of the nineteenth century.

In the same century there were parallel activities in the U.S.A. The Englishman Place influenced the Americans Robert Dale Owen (1801–1877) and Charles Knowlton (1800–1850) whose writings were known in Britain in the 1830s. It was one of Knowlton's pamphlets which, in 1876, became the centrepiece of the celebrated trial of Charles Bradlaugh and Annie Besant, best known to the world of to-day as a theosophist. It was shortly after this trial, which received wide publicity, that Britain's birth-rate, then standing at about thirty-five per thousand, began to fall. With minor intermissions, it fell steadily to its lowest peace-time record of 14·4 in 1934.

During the nineteenth century the birth control movement was mainly espoused by people who held unorthodox political and religious views, many of whom described themselves as atheists or rationalists. The Churches and the weight of traditional opinion were indignantly hostile. The arguments advanced during the nineteenth century in favour of birth control were as diverse as now, but they had a characteristic politico-social tinge. They were much concerned with how the working classes could be plunged into dire poverty and degradation by numerous children.

The movement made a noteworthy stride forward in the last ten years of the period under consideration—between 1920 and 1930. The barrier of conventional and theological

* A paper read at the Fifth International Conference on Planned Parenthood, Tokyo, October 1955.

prejudice was then broken by Dr. Marie Stopes, a woman of high scientific attainments whose well-written books were eagerly bought and read in successive editions which ran into hundreds of thousands. The experience which guided this gifted woman's energies into these channels were in part personal. She had been strictly brought up in ignorance of the elementary principles of sexual physiology and therefore suffered much in early marriage. Her first book in this field was concerned with the theme and carried the title of *Married Love*; it was essentially a plea for enlightenment in a sphere of unique importance for women. The theme of birth control was sounded in her next book *Wise Parenthood* which was published in November 1918—seven days after the signing of the armistice which ended the first world war. In the next two years she raised funds for and opened the first birth control clinic in Britain. Her orientation, though in part social and eugenic, was mainly humanitarian and personal. Birth control was for her a means of freeing women from the bondage of numerous and unwanted pregnancies; hence her outlook was also feminist and libertarian.

There was much postwar unemployment in the 1920s and at the end of the decade the world-wide economic depression set in, thus aggravating the unemployment. There was much deprivation and disillusionment among the workless whose sufferings gave further impetus to the birth control movement. Support was energetically given by many socialist writers and thinkers among whom H. G. Wells and Bertrand Russell were prominent. The medical profession mostly stood aloof though some gave vigorous expression to their convictions. Among these Lord Dawson, the physician of King George V, was noteworthy as a supporter.

A part which was not dissimilar to that played in England by Marie Stopes was taken in the U.S.A. by Margaret Sanger. She has told us how her ideals and zeal were channelled into the birth control movement. This happened not because of early marital difficulties but because of what she saw when working among the poorest families in New York. Under her leadership the movement spread in the U.S.A. during the ten years 1920–1930 much as it was doing in England, though against more concrete legal obstacles. Because she deliberately challenged laws which she regarded as pernicious, Margaret Sanger was committed several times to prison. I like to think of the parallelism during this decade between the movements in Britain and the U.S.A., in both of which the inspiration, provided by women, was mainly personal and humanitarian. The weighty demographic considerations, arising from population pressure, which, since the end of the second world war, have largely powered the movements in Japan and India, played but a small part.

(b) *The Eugenic Movement*

The originator of eugenics and the inventor of the word was Sir Francis Galton (1822–1911), an explorer and an investigator with an exceptionally wide range of interests. He was a half first cousin of Charles Darwin; and it was the latter's evolution theory, propounded in 1859, which provided both the inspiration and the foundation of eugenics.

For Galton, eugenics was an attempt to apply evolutionary principles to man; it was a method by which man could further his own evolution in desirable directions. "Man," he wrote at the age of eighty-six, "is gifted with pity and other kindly feelings. I conceive it to fall well within his province to replace natural selection by other processes that are more merciful and not less effective. This is precisely the aim of eugenics." A great power, he believed, was here available which could be wisely or foolishly directed.

What were the qualities which Galton regarded as eugenically valuable? A considerable list could, he said, be compiled upon which most people would agree. It would include health, energy, manliness and a courteous disposition. He would himself take physique, ability and character into account, the last being the most important though the most difficult to measure. But he did not lay down definite principles. He recognized the need for variety. Civilizations

differ; so do the ideals towards which they strive and the human types they most admire. The same can be said for classes and vocations. The qualities praised in a soldier are not those specially valued in an artist, artisan or statesman. But each class, profession, vocation or sect recognizes its good and bad types. " The aim of eugenics," Galton wrote, " is to represent each class by its best specimens: that done to leave them to work out their common civilization in their own way."

" Eugenics," said Galton in his best definition of the word, " is the science which deals with all influences that improve the inborn qualities of a race; also with those that develop them to the best advantage."

Eugenics has two sides. What has been called negative eugenics is concerned with restricting the contribution to the next generation of persons of under-average natural endowments; positive eugenics with raising the same contribution of persons of above-average endowment.

The idea of bringing about a differential fertility favouring the better against the worse halves or " moieties " of the different sections of a community, thus changing the composition of succeeding generations in favour of the better moiety, is an aspect of positive eugenics which takes most of the population into account. There might be difficulties about where to draw the line between the two moieties; but the further we move above and below this area of uncertainty, the more recognizable does the individual's quality become.

But Galton discerned another and more restricted aspect of positive eugenics. This might be called élite eugenics in contrast to the foregoing " moiety eugenics." There exist in all sufficiently large countries a few exceptional persons who combine in high degree natural capacity, eagerness for work or zeal, and power of work. These rare persons, who compose less or much less than one per cent of the population, become outstanding figures. It was with such that Galton was concerned in his book, *Hereditary Genius*. He showed beyond doubt that their abilities were hereditary and that other members of their families were noteworthy or outstanding in much larger numbers than could have been yielded by chance. These élite families, Galton declared, were a country's most valuable assets, being a natural aristocracy. No efforts, however strenuous or costly, to secure their fully reproducing themselves would be wasted.

Both moiety and élite eugenics are commended by Galton in programmes of positive eugenics.

A similar distinction is applicable within the sphere of negative eugenics. The equivalent of the élite, whose fertility it would be an unquestionable service to the country to promote, is here the small group who are irremediably burdensome or harmful to society. The fertility of these, Galton thought, should be checked.

Before Galton's death in 1911 eugenic movements were started in several countries. In the U.S.A. extensive pedigree studies were made of anti-social families whose cost to the community was tentatively assessed. In Germany the writings of Gobineau (1816–1882), of Houston Stewart Chamberlain (1855–1926) and of Nietzsche (1844–1900), all of whom lived through the controversies about evolution which followed the publication of the *Origin of Species* (1859), were preoccupied with doctrines of race. These doctrines were essentially alien to Galton's thought.

From this short review it will, I hope, be clear how different were the origins of the birth control and eugenic movements. The former had complex origins in the doctrines of Malthus, the afflictions of the industrial proletariat, and the crusading zeal of social reformers. The eugenics movement began much later than the other (the word eugenics was first used in 1883) and its origins were simpler. It was derived from the evolution theory and from the revisions of traditional patterns of thought which this theory necessitated. Compared to the other, the eugenics movement could have but a limited appeal. It satisfied no universal need and, in so far as it involves the making of value-judgments of human beings (from which as many come out unfavourably as favourably),

it could in its early days scarcely commend itself to more than a sophisticated minority.

**2. From 1930 to 1955: Reorientations of both movements**

(a) *The Birth Control Movement*

Many important events have occurred in the twenty-five years 1930–1955.

I mentioned earlier that, by 1934, the birth-rate in Britain had fallen to 14·3 per thousand. In the course of the decade 1930–1940 grave misgivings came to be felt in several European countries about the prospects of maintaining numbers with such low rates as were then prevailing. The population pyramid and the net reproduction rate were popularised. Pyramids for Britain and the Scandinavian countries showed sinister undercuts which boded ill for the future; and net reproduction rates had fallen well below unity. It has been said of this period that an over-population scare was suddenly reversed into a depopulation scare. In Britain the change came suddenly in 1936. Attention was widely turned to events in France which for some years had been haunted by fears of depopulation and where, during years of peace, deaths had been exceeding births.

The birth control movement reacted to these events. By then a network of voluntary clinics had, in Britain, been established throughout the country. Most of these were affiliated to the organization which later became the Family Planning Association which is represented at this conference. The Association encouraged clinics to organize, in addition to the work on birth control, services for the diagnosis and treatment of infecundity; and the idea spread that family planning services should be dispensed as part of a comprehensive service concerned with the general well-being of the family. Among these allied services were marriage guidance, premarital examinations, guidance on genetic or eugenic problems, maternity and child welfare. This view was, in 1949, authoritatively and unanimously advocated by a British Royal Commission on Population. If I understand the matter correctly this is also the position now taken by the Indian Government whose intention it is that family planning services should form part of wider health services.

I may add that, by the end of the 1930s, the need for birth control on personal and medical grounds had been so widely accepted in Britain that organized opposition from all except Roman Catholics had practically disappeared. Hence the movement suffered little if at all from the depopulation scare which had by then become fairly widespread.

It was in the decade 1930–1940 than an interest in the possibilities of voluntary sterilization also developed.

But another event of maximal importance has occurred during the last twenty-five years which I am now discussing. In 1947, India became a sovereign nation. Plans for the country's future development were prepared. It was quickly recognized by the planners that hopes of raising living standards could be frustrated if India's recent increases in population gained momentum. A "demographic" argument for birth control which, though recognised, has never carried much weight in western countries, was suddenly brought into central prominence. This "demographic" argument derives its cogency from the sudden enhancement of human powers over death—we might call this power "death control"—by the discoveries of antibiotics and insecticides and by improved methods of producing and transporting food. Many lives are saved and many prolonged. Unless the effects of death control are balanced by a corresponding exercise in birth control, populations must increase at an accelerating speed.

The newly-acquired cogency of this "demographic" argument in favour of birth control seems to me to mark the decade of the 1940s in much the same way that the widely felt depopulation scare marks the preceding decade of the 1930s.

(b) *The Eugenic Movement*

The eugenic movement no less than the other met with difficulties in the years 1930–1940.

The manner in which the birth-rate had been falling drew attention to the much

discussed questions of differential fertility. Not only was birth control being more used by the upper and middle than by the lower classes, but within each occupation or social division it was being more used by the intelligent and provident moiety than by the other. These events caused misgivings to eugenists who, in Britain, were divided over the birth control question. Some condemned birth control outright as a cause of racial degeneration. Others gave it a qualified approval, seeing it as a necessary instrument of racial improvement; for these the problem was how to get birth control responsibly used.

A more serious difficulty was presented by current events in Germany. Hitler came into power in 1933 and in 1934 his sterilization law, which contained compulsory clauses, came into effect. Efforts to get a voluntary measure legalized in Britain were much hampered by what was going on in Germany. Opponents were convinced that voluntary measures were " the thin end of a wedge "; that they would prepare the way for a dictatorship with eugenic courts such as the Nazis had set up; and that in due course all reproductive processes would be controlled by the state.

During the 1930s, moreover, the socialist movement made much headway among voters. Socialists did not withdraw their support from the birth control movement. But many showed animus against eugenics. During the decade sociological research was active in Britain. It was shown that the differences in diet and living conditions between the urban working classes and the middle classes were such that the working classes were physiologically and socially handicapped. In the early years of the twentieth century social class had been treated by some writers on eugenics as providing a standard of eugenic merit, the upper classes being regarded as eugenically superior to the lower. This, as I have already stressed, was not the standpoint of Sir Francis Galton who recognized the need for diversity and thought of each vocation, however humble, as divisible into moieties.

It is not surprising that the equation of eugenic merit with social class was found repugnant by those who were concerned about how the poorer classes were denied the opportunity of realising their full physical and mental potentialities. Eugenics, said an influential socialist critic in the mid-1930s, was a system of class prejudice masquerading as science; and another such critic went so far as to call it a system of fascist myths. Differences between people or groups, it was widely declared, would not be confidently regarded as inborn until environmental conditions had been made uniform for all.

I do not know how much of this sort of criticism was heard in the U.S.A.

### 3. The Position To-day

(a) *The Birth Control Movement*

What is the position to-day in the mid-twentieth century? I will mention two features which seem to me noteworthy.

The first is the speed with which the *principle* of birth control (I am not referring to its practice by appliance methods) is being accepted throughout the world. This principle is now rarely held to be impious or offensive to God. In Britain the Churches, which were clamorously hostile a hundred years ago, are now mostly well-disposed. Indeed, their reactions to the recommendations of the Royal Commission on Population, a mid-twentieth century event, would have seemed almost unbelievable to the Anglican bishops of a century earlier. I understand that, in the U.S.A., the position is more complex and that the different States vary in their attitude.

It was a source of astonishment to me when, in 1952, I learned from Lady Rama Rau, Dr. Radhakrishnan and others in Bombay that there was no doctrinal opposition to the principles of birth control in Hindu philosophy, despite the position adopted by the widely revered Mahatma Gandhi. I know nothing about the Islamic position, but I have recently been informed on fairly good authority that, according to a recent declaration by a high religious dignitary, Moslems are enjoined not to bring into the world more children than they can themselves competently rear. If there are delegates from Egypt here they may be able

to tell us more. That birth control is not contrary to essential Shinto and Buddhist precepts, or at any rate not more contrary than is the practice of abortion, I infer from the sponsorship of this conference. I am not clear about the position of Jewry or about that of the Greek and Russian Orthodox churches. These may well succeed in clarifying their positions in the next five years.

The second feature which strikes me about the mid-century is how the two-sidedness of the population problem is being increasingly recognized. One side of the problem is the menace, or seeming menace, of depopulation to some developed countries; the other side is the simultaneous threat of over-population to countries in different continents and latitudes. Let me take France as an example. As you know, metropolitan France has, for the whole of this century, been uneasy about the replacement of her population and, during several peace-time years, has actually experienced excesses of deaths over births. Birth control is strongly discouraged and abortions severely punished. But Algeria is now a part of France. The Moslem population of Algeria, eight times more numerous than the European, has a high birth-rate (41.9 in 1952) and a low death-rate (13.0 in 1952). Hence the Algerian population is rapidly increasing. There is developing a considerable northward migration of Algerians into France where difficulties are being caused by differences in living standards. These difficulties compel the French to recognize the two-sidedness of the population problem. One side presents itself in metropolitan France; the other in Algeria.

This recognition is to be welcomed. It implies realism, flexibility of judgment and emancipation from doctrinal rigidities.

(b) *The Eugenic Movement*

The policies of the Nazi government have done this movement much harm; progress like that made by the birth control movement has been impossible. Nevertheless, knowledge of the genetics of many human infirmities has been advanced and in some countries services designed to provide guidance on genetic problems have been established.

From the standpoint adopted in this paper, however, the most important development of the last twenty-five years has been a restatement of the standards of eugenic value.

The American Eugenics Society (most ably led by Mr. Frederick Osborn to whom I wish to pay a tribute) and the British *Society* concur that to-day the most satisfactory standard of eugenic value is a sort of performance test which centres on the family. This standard, which is at the same time widely acceptable and easily translated into policy, is one according to which eugenic merit is assessed in terms of how far a married couple succeed in producing by design (i.e. by planned parenthood) a healthy and a happy family. To plan the births of a well-spaced family demands intelligence, foresight and restraint; to produce enough children for replacement implies a love of children and a sense of duty to a community which needs children; to provide them with a good home requires the power to make a success of marriage and of life outside the home.

The stress here is on moral and social qualities whose perpetuation is manifestly desirable.

Eugenists therefore aim at replacing the present generation by children who are deliberately conceived in the light of known medical, social and genetic factors. They favour the planned as against the unplanned family; and they wish to see the community so organized that its best citizens will feel eager to give full expression to the instincts of parenthood. This ideal is in accord with to-day's trends in child psychology which stress the importance for subsequent mental health of a sense of security and of reciprocated affection in infancy. The effects of heredity and of environment are not easy to separate; nearly always they are closely interwoven. The healthy and happy family perpetuates valuable inborn qualities; it also reproduces the conditions in which these qualities can develop to the best advantage.

This standard, which puts planned parenthood into the centre of the picture, brings

the eugenics and birth control movements together; and unlike standards based on class, it excites no prejudices. It remains to be seen how it will serve in the future.

**4. Problems of the Future**

These will be numerous, complex and largely unforeseeable. I will briefly mention five which I think likely to present themselves.

(a) *Possible Recurrence of Depopulation Scares*

In the late 1920s there suddenly began an economic depression which, by the early 1930s, had become world-wide. Another such world-wide depression may descend on us. If by the time this were to happen an efficient oral method of birth control had been discovered and had become widely used, there might ensue surprisingly rapid falls in the birth-rates of many countries, again giving rise to depopulation scares. We may thereafter witness oscillations between over-population and depopulation scares, varying from country to country. During periods of alarm and misgiving the birth control movement may be attacked and discouraged as it now is in France.

(b) *Moral Problems of Freedom versus Compulsion*

The problem is also likely to come to the fore of how far freedom can be preserved in the wide sphere of a political ideal and in the narrower one of the ethics of parenthood. It is a commonplace within the experience of all of us living in the year 1955 that, in times of danger and stress, freedom is curtailed whereas in times of prosperity and plenty it flourishes. During wars, compulsions and restrictions abound; these range from the compulsion of military service to the many compulsory regulations which a few years ago hemmed in every act of our daily lives. The same applies to conditions of shortage when, to prevent maldistribution of limited goods, rationing is necessary. In conditions of peace, abundance and prosperity regulations can be discarded and freedom becomes maximal.

How far do conditions of severe population pressure justify the principle of compulsion? In France misgivings about the dangers of depopulation generated a legal code which severely punished the practice of abortion and proscribed the sale of appliance methods of birth control. These restrictions of freedom were largely prompted by demographic considerations. How far should compulsory measures of an opposite character —measures designed to limit an excessive fertility deemed to be injurious to national interests—be tolerated?

The justification of such measures, as I see the matter, depends upon how urgent are the social or national issues which the measures are designed to solve. These issues should not be hastily judged by outsiders.

The essential point I am here making is that the balance between the need for compulsions and the claims of freedom is one which every country and every generation must interpret in its own manner in the light both of the external conditions which prevail and of the character and habits of that generation.

The same can be said about the balance between duties and rights. The despot is not much concerned with the rights of his subjects. But the extreme individualist and over-enthusiastic democrat may go too far in the opposite direction. He may be so concerned with an individual's claims and rights that he ignores his counter-balancing duties and responsibilities for the common good. This balance again needs to be interpreted anew by each generation.

The sense of duty and responsibility, if sufficiently strong in an over-populated country, might of itself be sufficient to influence the size of families in desired ways. If this were so, regulations and compulsions would be unnecessary. In any case outsiders should be sparing in their criticisms.

(c) *Problems of Urbanism*

The connection between urbanism and fertility has long been recognized; that between urbanism and mental health is now being discerned. Children do not thrive in narrow streets and on pavements. They

need fresh air, green trees and fields, the sands of the seashore and familiarity with the animals which play such a large part in their imagination and in their story books. In fascist Italy, Mussolini introduced " ruralization schemes " as part of a positive population policy. Whether or not depopulation scares recur, the problem of the balance between urban and country life will claim increasing attention. Considerations of demography will be linked with those of child psychology in attempts to provide rural conditions for children, especially in their early lives.

(d) *The Roman Catholic Church*

The Roman Catholic Church is now in a somewhat difficult position. The Pope recognizes that the population problem has " anguishing aspects " both in its personal and demographic bearings. He has also declared that the size of the family should be determined by the parents in the light of the well-being of their children. But the Church opposes appliance methods of birth control. Continence and the rhythm method are alone permissible. But what of the rhythm method?

A valuable beginning has been made in the impartial investigation of this method by the Indian Government. The results can scarcely be regarded as favourable to the method. But further inquiries are needed, and will doubtless be made, in other countries. For example, the method should be assessed when used by a group of women who have learned about it in a course of pre-marital instruction.

The practicability and reliability of the rhythm method are vital issues for the Roman Catholic population of the world which amounts to about half a billion. If the method is conclusively shown to be inadequate, the Church will be faced with a serious difficulty. In that case, other methods may later be sanctioned; but what these may be is at present quite unforeseeable.

(a) *The Problem of Shunned Industries*

An unfortunate by-product of the industrial revolution is the unpleasant nature of much of the work that must be done. Some industrially developed countries are to-day having troubles of recruitment into shunned occupations. In Britain this is now happening in the coal mining industry. The admission to the coalfields of Italian miners has been actively debated. Similar difficulties have occurred in the hotel industry which, in coastal areas, is largely seasonal. The immigration of people from Barbados who are willing to do this work is being discussed.

Difficulties of recruitment for shunned industries may well increase. They may result in new migratory movements and race mixtures which, in their turn, may give rise to problems of differential fertility. I do not know how far Japan has had premonitions of such difficulties. They will, in my opinion, be increasingly felt by many developed countries.

**Conclusion**

All these considerations are ultimately reducible to a single question—that of how and when people feel social responsibilities and how they discharge these responsibilities.

The central problem of eugenics—a qualitative problem—is how to inculcate and distribute a sense of social responsibility which will encourage the better moieties of each occupational grouping to make the fullest contribution to the next generation; and how to create environmental conditions of such a kind as to favour the free exercise of such responsibility.

But the immediate problem in Japan, if I understand your present position correctly, is a simpler one with mainly quantitative implications. It first presents itself as the problem of how to alter the timing of the exercise of parental responsibility. Such responsibility can be exercised at three different moments within a short period of a few months, namely after the birth of a child, between the child's conception and birth, and before the child's conception.

Unless I am mistaken, the population of Japan was, a hundred years ago, somewhat cut off from the outside world. But your people were then well aware of the balance between human numbers and your islands'

native resources. Numbers were then partly regulated by infanticide: that is to say that the sense of social responsibility found expression in action after the child was born. By the policy of abortion, the sense of responsibility is exercised at an earlier stage, namely between the child's conception and its birth. What is now desired is to shift this exercise still farther back, namely to the period before the child is conceived. Such anticipation of events is easy to describe but, I well appreciate, difficult to inculcate and enact. Is this perhaps your central problem —how to recondition, or condition anew, the exercise of parental responsibility?

To an outsider like myself it seems that the national characteristics of the Japanese people, which have enabled your country to industrialize itself and, in such a short time, to take her place among the foremost nations of the world, will favour her in the task we are now considering. The Japanese, I say respectfully, are intelligent, adaptable and quick to learn. They are also disciplined and dutiful, placing a high value on loyalty. These characteristics, coupled with a capacity for self-sacrifice which has made them redoubtable in war, and coupled also with a strong love of children, should equip them better than most western countries for the cultural transition now called for. The experiment will be unique in the world's history and, if it is successful, may become one of the most noteworthy features of the second half of the twentieth century. The rest of the world will watch your experiences not only with interest but with sympathy.